

The Early Days of A Better Website

A reporter asked me to describe what the early days of our startup were like. Here's my response.

In the early days of Reddit, there were four of us crammed into a dingy little three-bedroom apartment (I slept in a kitchen cabinet). Every morning we'd wake up and stumble into the small space that I think was supposed to be a living room, where we'd placed desks along all four walls (Steve's wall had a small window, with a beautiful view of the wall of the next building over, just a couple feet away). The sky would be gray, the floor would be filthy, and we'd be three feet floors away from the rest of the world. Looking back, it's hard to see how we got any work done. Actually, looking back, I'm not sure we did.

Aside from the filth, my memories of those days mostly consist of an unending series of petty annoyances and frustrations. It's hard spending your working days in such close quarters with other people. It's even harder when you spend your nights there too. And it's almost impossible when you're all high-strung socially-awkward geeks. Tensions frequently flared.

Not that there wasn't a lot to get flared about. There were always bugs or complaints or new features you just couldn't get to work. And when you finally got the site working fine, a new storm of traffic would overwhelm things and you'd be back to picking up the pieces, making it run faster and more reliably.

There were lots of problems, but somehow we got over them. Take a nap, walk the fifteen minutes into town to get some food, go across the street to the abandoned playground, or, when things got really bad, just look at that ever-growing traffic graph. We must be doing something right, we figured, or at least not doing much that's particularly wrong.

While behind the scenes work was a disaster, in public things were going great. Every time we went out, more people seemed to know what Reddit was. We started selling Reddit t-shirts and people wearing them and recognizing started to pop up over town. One fan, on a short trip to Boston, even made a pilgrimage to our apartment and stole the Reddit sticker off our door. (We only found out where the missing sticker had gone when he bragged about it on his blog.) Reddit heads started appearing on more and more weblogs and sites I read started talking about Reddit as if they assumed everyone already knew what it was.

At parties, the awkwardness of trying to tell people what we did for a living ("We, uh, build a website. You know, it's kind of a news-type website.") gave way to recognition ("Oh yeah, I've heard of that site."), and then to profuse thanks for a great time-waster. Towards the end, actual introductions became unnecessary — people started recognizing us and coming up to say hi.

When I went home to visit my family, my dad insisted on setting up a meeting for me with a magazine publisher he knew. I was sure the visit would be a disaster — why would a magazine publisher take a punk kid like me seriously? — but once she heard our monthly visitor numbers, she was eager to start a partnership. The same scene repeated itself over and over.

Even when people had no idea what we did, the traffic gave us confidence. Once we won a free meal at a restaurant (actually, we won at least three different times) in exchange for suffering through a short lecture about financial planning opportunities. As the man talked about being sure to put money away for a safe day, we looked at each other knowingly. Either we'd sell big or blow up entirely. Staying safe just wasn't in our vocabulary.

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